

Open Minds

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I took a deep breath in, trying to relax as I read the chief complaint: Depo restart. What did that mean? Pregnancy? No big deal, I thought. I've seen this a couple of times before. Then, I read the patient's demographics. Age: 13. My heart sank a few inches into my chest. 13 years old? 13 years old?! And we are questioning pregnancy?! My mind filled with fleeting thoughts of what I used to do when I was 13. Ride my bike. Play some basketball. Read a book. Go hiking in the woods. I mean, I was only in 7th grade. Oh my... ..7th grade - and that is where this girl is. I wrapped my psyche around the idea and reluctantly embraced it for the moment. Thank heavens I found at least some measure of peace as I entered back into reality and found myself walking over to this patient's door.

Knock, knock, knock. I entered the room and braced myself for what could be waiting on the other side of the door. Expecting to find some sort of emotional puddle accumulating on the floor, I was taken aback to see two young Hmong women sitting calmly in the chairs next to the desk. One was wearing a blaze orange camouflage pullover and the other a blue winter jumpsuit with a blaze orange hat. Emma was presenting today with her mom. I introduced myself as a medical student and thanked them for spending some time with me before visiting with the doctor. Mom waved her hands in dismissal of my appreciation and started right in with the reason for their visit. "You tell Emma about the birth control and about the STDs! You tell her importance of taking the Depo!" Mom was visibly distraught about being here, but I needed to get the story from Emma's perspective. I sat down,

thanked them both for coming, and turned my attention to Emma.

"Can you tell me what brings you in today?" She peeked timidly over the brim of her sweatshirt and whispered, "I want the Depo". I nod in agreement, and tell her, "Birth control is a great way to protect yourself from becoming pregnant. But before we can get you contraception, we need to make sure you aren't currently pregnant. Is it okay if I ask you a few questions?" She nods in agreement.

I start in with the typical history for a woman coming in requesting birth control: family history, personal history of DVTs, age at menarche, social habits, health habits. Then, it came time to ask about sexual history. From what I've learned so far, it is difficult in the moment, but often more rewarding in the end, to be blunt when asking about sex. I came to learn that Emma had a boyfriend for the past four and a half months. "Have you had sex with him?" Emma blushed, and turned to her mother. Mom chimed in, "I think so. Tell the doctor, Emma." I reassure Emma that what she tells me is completely confidential, and that it's part of my job not to tell other people about her sex life. Emma is still hesitant. I ask if she would feel more comfortable if mom waited outside. Emma nodded vigorously, and mom stepped out.

Again, I reassured Emma that what she told me would not leave the room. She nodded in consent. "Can you tell me a little bit about you and your boyfriend? Are you two sexually active?" Emma looked a little confused and immediately asked, "what do you mean?" I tried again. "Do you and your boyfriend have

sex?” Again, Emma blushed and nodded.

“Okay,” I stated, “what kind?” Now, she was really perplexed. I took a moment to explain the different kinds of sex. Once we got the different modalities of intimacy established, she told me that she has penile-vaginal intercourse with her boyfriend and uses condoms “once in a while”. Naturally, by this point, my mind was wandering down the “really?!” path. How was it that this young teen could barely differentiate what type of sex she was having, and yet was coming in worrying about pregnancy. Where did we go wrong? How can society let an entire generation of teens stumble and fall off this cliff? Unprotected sex at 13?! Really?! I wrestled to return to the present and once there, continued my conversation with Emma.

Once we had established the grounds for why she was here, I asked her, “Is there any concern you would have for being pregnant?” She looked me in the eye, and with more certainty than I had seen out of her this visit, she states, “Nope.” Okay, phew, I thought. “I’m going to ask you a few more questions Emma. Is that okay?” We go over the signs and symptoms of pregnancy, one at a time. She agreed to being nauseated every morning for the past month, an increase in breast size, increased breast tenderness, clothing feeling tighter, increased urinary frequency, abdominal tightness, and several episodes of emesis in the mornings. I could feel my bowels spiraling down to the abyss of “uh oh...”. I asked her again, “Are you certain that there is no way you could be pregnant right now?” Again, she looked me in the eye, and states with certainty, “Nope.” I thank Emma for spending some time with me, and tell her that we are going to run a tests before deciding whether or not to administer her Depo shot today. She consents, and I excuse myself from the room.

Part of me wanted to run down the hallway. I couldn’t decide if I wanted to run because she was 13, and that freaked me out, or if I was that anxious to find out her lab results. I got back to the resident room, and briefed my resident on the situation. We looked up Emma’s urine pregnancy test together. Positive.

I walked back to Emma’s room together with the resident and mentally prepared myself to tell this 13-year-old girl of her pregnancy. All three of us sat

down together and my resident told Emma, “Your urine pregnancy test came back positive and that means you are pregnant. How does that make you feel?” Emma looked at both of us timidly and said, “It makes me feel nervous...we should call my mom in to the room.” The resident asked Emma, “Are you okay with sharing this information with your mom right now?” Emma nodded.

I walked out to the waiting room to find mom sitting calmly next to the wall. Without a word, she was up and halfway across the room before I could even gesture to her to join us. Mom was pretty anxious when she got back to the room. “How it went?” she asked. The resident turned her attention to mom and stated, “Emma’s pregnancy test came back positive.” Mom started chuckling, which almost turned in to a full blown laughter. She looked at us and said, “That’s impossible, she had abortion yesterday.”

My world stopped. What an idiot, I thought. How could I have missed that?! Seriously?! I forgot to ask one question. ONE vital question: have you ever been pregnant before? Because it didn’t occur to me that a 13-year-old would have been pregnant before.

I apologized profusely to both Emma and her mother, and we clarified the situation together. Emma had been pregnant at ten weeks and four days. She had an abortion the day before, and was still cramping and bleeding. It all made sense now. Of course her UPT was still positive. Of course she had all the signs of being pregnant. She had been pregnant just yesterday. I turned my attention away from trying to decide if this 13-year-old was pregnant to addressing the psychological issues surrounding abortion (not to mention an abortion at 13). The resident and I counseled both Emma and mom on the importance of contraception and the importance of using condoms to protect from STDs. We reassured Emma that the bleeding and cramping would subside in a few days at most and agreed to give her the Depo shot, despite her positive UPT.

Emma and mom left clinic that day, relieved that Emma now had birth control. I watched them in their blazing orange attire, making their way to the door. At that moment, I realized the impact they had on me and the fact that they would never know how

deeply I had been affected.

As a future physician, the importance of taking a history and asking “the right questions” is stressed on such a regular basis, and yet, many students frequently fail to do so. We become numb to the idea that we have asked all “the right questions” and that we’ve got the story down like the back of our hands. These two Hmong women re-taught me the importance of keeping an open mind when entering the examination room. As a third year medical student, I am still mulling through the multitude of specialties and ideas of what I would like to do when I become a “real doctor”. One thing I do know is that whichever specialty I choose to pursue, I will earnestly do my best to keep an open and inquisitive mind with each patient I encounter.